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AUTHOR Biddle, James R.
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ABSTRACT

In the mid-1980s, a community college in a parochial Appalachian town became a state university. The new university was created at the behest of a powerful state politician despite the opposition of the faculty, administration, and board of the community college. A college of education was created and an interdisciplinary general education program containing strands of pluralistic multiculturalism was designed. Consultants from other universities, drawn by the opportunity of "creating a university from scratch," brought technical and academic expertise but little in the way of understanding or strategies for implementation into the area's culture. When the local culture, which values remembering its cultural system in order to reproduce it, was "invaded" by a culture that values reflecting on its systems in order to "improve" them, conflict was inevitable. From the perspective of those viewing the university as a pluralistic culture forced upon them, the curricular changes being proposed were clear cases of cultural imperialism. The dominant local culture saw democratic pluralism as yet another way for progressives to push larger societal goals over the values of smaller communities. In the end, few of the "outsiders" lasted 4 years, and the proposed changes were subverted by inaction. The study reflects on the need to clarify the reasons for having a multicultural curriculum before engaging in a parochialist-pluralist dialectic. (SV)

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SISYPHUS IN APPALACHIA: PLURALISM vs PAROCHIALISM IN A NEWLY ESTABLISHED STATE UNIVERSITY

James R. Biddle
Associate Professor
University of Dayton

American Educational Studies Association
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SISYPHUS IN APPALACHIA:
PLURALISM vs PAROCHIALISM IN
A NEWLY ESTABLISHED STATE UNIVERSITY

> *As educators, we are not clear about multiculturalism. We always have had a diversity of voices in the United States. Why broaden the curriculum now? What do we intend? Simply to know our culture, past and present? What about the future? Just our culture? Do we want students to know about a variety of cultures, or do we intend to shape, evaluate, and change their attitudes and behaviors as they study other cultures? Do we want to compare and contrast cultures for curiosity's sake or do we envision learning from other cultures for the good of humanity? We are struggling because we have not made explicit our own reasons for changing-or not changing-the curriculum, even though world developments encourage it* (Gaudiani, 1991, p.12).

PROLOGUE

A small river town in the tri-state region of West Virginia, Kentucky and Ohio had experienced so many boom-bust economic cycles (as did many such border towns during the 20th century) that it developed signs of a manic-depressive personality. Initially, industries came because of the natural resources and location. When the natural resources were depleted, companies, sometimes with little or no notice, just left. After the rails and river were replaced by trucks and planes, rails rusted, docks rotted, and the town experienced yet another recession/depression. So today, vacant and decaying buildings of past industries are constant reminders of "the best of times and the worst of times."

Between the increasingly deep cycles of economic/social depression come periodic revivals as businesses try to capitalize on the high unemployment. Inevitably, the Appalachian tragedy plays itself out:

"labor problems" arise, neither side blinks--and business/industry leaves. Once in awhile, workers are guaranteed jobs in the new locations. Of the few who follow the jobs and leave the area, almost 90% of return "home" within three years--despite the fact that no jobs await them.

Kay (1981) captures the parochial community's mixed messages and mixed reactions to both those who are successful in leaving and those who are not. "When the person is not successful in leaving, the person often has an overlay of negative attitudes toward his or her self and the community in which he or she feels trapped as a failure" (p. 39). This is the case even though the community often rewards those who stay. For the rewards, when tainted by community doubts about the person's abilities and mixed with the person's negative feelings, produce a glorification of mediocrity--the status quo is always good enough even though it is deteriorating. On the other hand, the community is both proud and disdainful of those who leave; they are often treated as a privileged prodigal--an admired black sheep who is likable, but only at a distance.

So what is left is a small minority population (less than 3%), a high percentage of people who live within a 20 mile radius of where they were born, many people who feel trapped but act as though they have chosen to stay, and an almost nonexistent middle class. The county is a nearly perfect picture of a "have and have-not society" having both the state's highest per capita savings and the highest incidence of welfare recipients.

This mixture of provincialism, paranoia, and pragmatism existing within a master-slave culture has left its imprint on the school's role within the community. Several studies (Danbom 1979, Theobald 1988, and Howe 1992), document the ways anti-intellectualism, prejudice, and

parochialism are preserved in rural midwestern and Appalachian communities. Theobald (1988) notes that the "code of silence" surrounding prejudice and anti-intellectualism is an essential characteristic as "schools became self-perpetuating agents of socialization" (p. 367). Danbom (1979) finds that same thing in communities dedicated to their "tiny schools because they were controlled by the neighborhoods under a system of neighborhood democracy" (1979). Hence, the community's values silently became institutionalized in schools where "our" boys and girls are taught by "our" boys and girls; those who leave for an extended time find it difficult to be hired by schools and those from the "outside" need strong inside pull to even be considered for teaching positions.

Throughout the economic cycles noted before, formal education was never viewed as a solution--if anything, it might be a problem. Only recently have either the people or itinerant business/industry admitted a relationship between education and the economy of the region. Indeed, in the immediate past, an educated workforce was neither necessary or desirable from either the employers' or employees' standpoints. These views, coupled with the culture's long-standing bias against formal education, continue to produce one of the lowest high school graduation rates and the lowest rate of participation in post-secondary education in the state.

What the town had produced by the 1960s, however, was a powerful politician. By the mid-80s, the local State Representative achieved the distinction of being Speaker of the House longer than any Speaker in U. S. history. Although he has little formal education himself, he generally supports the education establishment at budget times and he sees the

relationship between technical training and employment. Therefore, he moved to establish a technical school and then a technical "college" in the area in the early 1970s. With his help, a state university sixty miles away had already established a branch campus where pre-professional courses in education and business were offered.

By the late 70s, "The Speaker" (his title to friend and foe alike) maneuvered the merger of the three institutions (much to the consternation of most of the supporters of each institution) to form a community college located on the site of the former branch campus. Having more power over the state's "purse strings" than even the governor, "The Speaker" speaks and it is so. So it was that in the mid 80s, to the shock and dismay of most political and educational leaders, The Speaker decreed that the recently formed community college would now become a state university.

"Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" quickly became the "in" quotation. The state's twelve universities battle for declining enrollments and decreasing finances; legislators and the Board of Regents scramble for justifications for what is going to happen; the Community College's supporters fear the loss of its "practical and relevant" focus; the faculty, and administration of the Community College overwhelming oppose the change; and the Board of Trustees, patterning itself after a local school board, fear losing control over its neighborhood school--the Community College.

Never mind that no one had asked for nor wanted a university--it was coming. And in this enclave of parochialism, a curriculum promoting global and multicultural values was to be developed.

PUSH

In the Fall of 1986, the author was hired by the Community College-turned-State University to create a College of Education. (Even though the area had the highest surplus of certified teachers without teaching positions of any region in the state.) At the same time, a person was hired as Provost/President: he would become President after one year as Provost. (Despite his three presidencies in much larger, more comprehensive institutions and his mentor's, the current President, past administrative experience as a school superintendent.) We, the "first new hires," joining an existing faculty and administration of over one hundred, believed our charge was to create the conceptual designs for the general education and baccalaureate programs.

The new president's international experiences and contacts disposed him to support a global/multicultural curricular emphasis and faculty recruitment policy; the author's responsibilities included designing an interdisciplinary general education program containing strands of pluralistic multiculturalism as well as the creating the College of Education; and both worked together on designing broad, integrated B.A. and B.S. programs reflective of existing institutional strengths and responsive to perceived regional needs. Both of us generally viewed our task as "creating a university from scratch," albeit neither in isolation from nor without broad involvement of existing staff. Nevertheless, we were unaware that "In certain important respects, we led ourselves down the garden path. We rarely examined one of the less appealing facts about all cultures: the near universality of ethnocentrism" (Nicholas, 1991, p. 21).

One of the conditions imposed by the Legislature and the Board of Regents was the use of consultants from universities having programs similar to the ones being proposed. While we generally looked to institutions ostensibly respected by the University's personnel, academic considerations took precedent over cultural concerns. Therefore, the string of consultants converging on the University brought technical and academic expertise but little in the way of understandings or strategies about implementation into the culture of the area. Most of the consultants were drawn by the same thing that appealed to the new President and myself--the opportunity of "creating a university from scratch." Somehow the issues of culture-clash were seen as "minor differences" --real but not problematic.

PULL

> *We cannot truly see ourselves as others see us without a genuine, relativistic grasp of the matrix of meaning created by another culture. It is doubtless true that the first steps toward such understanding are faltering, and the first grasp is weak, but there is a clear need to get started. Unless we understand the scale and significance of true cultural differences and cultivate an awareness of our own ethnocentrism, our society will continue in the strangely compelling grip of what Freud, with merciless accuracy, characterized as "the narcissism of minor differences"* (Nicholas, 1991, 21).

During WW II, my father moved to the heart of Kentucky's hills to build a sawmill to provide lumber for the family's out-of-state construction firm. Had I sought his insights into Appalachian culture prior to my attempts to "create a university from scratch," I may have better understood Freud's observation. When I finally asked, he told me, for

example, that all who do not understand the potency of the admonition "don't rise above your raisings," will stumble "down the garden path." For the Appalachian culture's version of the "glass ceiling" was in place long before its current gender application.

Why should anyone have expected that a culture believing the past to be determinative and the present absolute, and holding all strangers suspect, would not "feud" over honoring differences of kind or degree? When the definition of "us" in "us agin them" is basically "kin," and "place" is an area no more than a thirty minute drive away, the "world" takes on a very particular meaning. To suggest, therefore, a curriculum espousing multicultural/pluralistic values is a "magnification of minor differences" thereby calling the existing cultural system into question.

Nicholas (1991) continues by reminding us that "Throughout the history of our species, culture has been our chief means of adaptation, but it can constrain us just as well as it liberates us. . . . Accepted unreflectively, the tradition of any cultural system is a prison of human capacity" (p. 21) When a culture which values remembering its cultural system in order to reproduce it is "invaded" by a culture which values reflecting on its systems in order to "improve" them, a clash of continuity over change is inevitable. Liberating prisoners from what they perceive to be a prison is an event to be celebrated; "liberating" inhabitants from their space is "cultural kidnapping" and is to be resisted and even fought against if necessary.

One of the several misunderstandings of those pushing for change was the difference in strategy not purpose between the "schooled" and "unschooled" resistors. Indeed, the ways "schooled" members of an

Appalachian culture resist and fight were neither understood nor even recognized until their success was finally apparent. For while their provincialism and paranoia were noted, those of us pushing for change did not heed Buchmann's (1992) reminder that "parochialism by inheritance must be distinguished from parochialism by choice" (p. 106). Not only was the artful and strategic pragmatism of a culture successfully resisting "invasion" for decades underrated, but so too the acquired, practiced, bureaucratic pragmatism of those parochial by both inheritance and choice grossly underestimated.

Those of us in academe certainly should recognize the tactics of the reification of rhetoric and the symbolic displacement of substance--of all professions, we have perfected the art of dichotomizing program and practice. Those from a cultural tradition of reflecting on its systems, usually engage in more vigorous debates about change before making some adaptations or before reaching their presuppositional and non-evidential threshold of continuity; meanwhile, those who choose their parochialism often passively acquiesce to that which, in their learned bureaucratic experiences, they can subvert by inaction or withstand until the momentary siege is over. After all, invaders always leave and if they do not leave quickly enough, one can always sabotage. For the destruction of what was never desired is not a loss; indeed, its destruction may be the means of restoring what was lost!

PERSPECTIVE

> *By endorsing the promotion of the culturally encumbered liberal educational ideal through public education in order to create citizens suited for a liberal democratic political-economic community, progressives in the liberal democratic tradition appear in the end to be subject to the same criticism that may be leveled against conservatives: they dismiss cultural communities in favor of the political-economic community and, in the process, promote a kind of public education in which cultural minorities are required to give up their cultural identities if they are to succeed (Howe, 1992, p. 465).*

From the perspective of those viewing the "university" as a pluralistic culture forced upon them, the curricular changes being proposed were clear cases of cultural imperialism. The values, priorities and beliefs of the political community took precedent over those of the cultural community; tolerance, equality, etc. were reserved for other cultures, not the cultural "minority" which happen to be the local majority. The dominant local culture saw this a sham whereby democratic pluralism was yet another way for progressives to push larger societal goals over the values of smaller communities (Pratte, 1992). Perhaps they are right.

Goodenow (1984) notes that in the midst of speaking about global education and pluralism, the current reform effort

> seems to be heading the nation in the direction of *national* educational standards and curricula. Like similar movements at the turn of the century, in the 1920s, and in the 1950s, this one tends to show little outward interest in issues of structure, power, or ethnic, racial, and gender expression (p. 51).

So where is the point of equilibrium? How can respect for a cultural system which has as its overriding goal the reproduction of itself interface with a system dedicated to reflective change and continuity? Perhaps one

is always one generation away from such an equilibrium, for the answer appears to be with practitioners not programs.

> A vigorous community of practitioners will rightly demand fidelity to parochial concerns while tolerating and encouraging a range of particular conceptions of practice. Parochialism and *praxis* are concerns that are in a dialectical relationship, a relationship that must be confronted by individuals and communities. Teachers cannot escape either concern, yet there is legitimate and often troubling divergence in how the dialectic is lived (Hostetler, 1992, p.101).

Until a generation of practitioners are ready not only to confront the dialectical relationship of parochialism and *praxis*, but also to commit to the struggle to live out that dialectic in their practice, parochial concerns will continue to do battle with pluralistic curricular issues. But before that lived dialectic becomes a reality, higher education must address the questions asked by Gaudiani quoted at the beginning of this paper: what are our reasons for having a multicultural curriculum?

P.S.

And what happened to the "first two new hires?" The President was forced to resign (after only eighteen months) by "The Speaker" in a showdown over who was really running the University. About forty new faculty were hired, including the author; he lasted four years--less than ten of the forty lasted that long.

The conceptual designs for all the programs were indeed "cutting edge." Faculty committees worked with consultants, programs were designed, state agencies were laudatory, funding agencies were impressed, and the culture transformed the progressive rhetoric into a progressively regressive status quo.

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